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A School District With Low Taxes and No Schools

By [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz., Feb. 13 — Just to be clear, Patrick Flynn says he loves public education. He just does not like the idea of paying for it.

So when it came time last November for the expanding, unincorporated desert community of Troon to choose between joining a nearby school district, and paying higher property taxes to help finance it, or starting its own, Mr. Flynn led the movement that created the Christopher Verde School District.

Not that the Christopher Verde district will have any schools, teachers or, apparently, students.

The children of Troon will continue to attend nearby schools. And thanks to a loophole in [Arizona](#) law, the grown-ups of Troon will continue to avoid paying property taxes in those districts, which makes officials in the districts less than mirthful.

“The whole purpose of this was to avoid taxes on their million-dollar homes,” said State Senator Linda Gray, [a Republican](#) who has sponsored a bill to prevent the formation of a school district without schools. (Ms. Gray conceded that there was at least one Flynn supporter who had “a half-million-dollar home.”)

Beginning in the next school year, Troon students will now pay tuition to the school district they attend, and that money will come from part of the property taxes collected by the new Christopher Verde district.

Even if Ms. Gray’s bill, which the Senate passed last month, becomes law, the taxpayers of Troon will not be affected. The legislation would not be retroactive.

“I am happy,” said Mr. Flynn, the president of a homeowners group in the area, which, he emphasized, had nothing to do with his opposition to higher property taxes.

The quandary over what to do with the roughly 450 public school children in Troon and adjacent Rio Verde essentially pits older homeowners in a place best known for its excellent golfing against young families who are part of this rapidly expanding area in North Scottsdale.

“By forming our own school district, the children will be educated by the schools they choose, and the residents will keep their tax rate the same,” said Mr. Flynn, a retired salesman whose children are grown.

Casey Perkins, a parent with a young child, disagreed. “I am willing to pay for my own child,” Ms. Perkins said. “I am paying Social Security, and I am never going to see it. But both are part of living in our

society.”

It is a face-off increasingly common across Arizona.

“The population and housing explosion of the past decade or so here has been driven by younger families, rather than by the traditional model of sun-seeking retirees from the Midwest or Canada,” said Stephen K. Doig, a census expert at [Arizona State University](#).

“Arizona is seeing more of the traditional battle of the generations,” Mr. Doig said, “between some retirees who want taxes — including school taxes — kept low, and most parents who want better support for the schools their kids attend.”

Under the state’s open-enrollment law, children may attend any public school, provided it has space. Children living in unincorporated areas with no schools of their own have traditionally been assigned to schools by neighboring districts.

Those children often had to attend schools 20 miles from their homes because the districts tended to give priority to families living — and paying taxes — in the district. When Ms. Perkins went to enroll her daughter in kindergarten in Scottsdale and realized that her child would be bused miles from home, Ms. Perkins said she was told by a district administrator, “Let’s face the facts, you are not paying your fair share.”

The Legislature enacted a law in 2005 to remedy the matter, obligating unincorporated areas with more than 150 students either to be absorbed by an adjoining school district or to create their own.

So when the question was put on the ballot here in November, voters narrowly favored creating a district instead of joining the closest existing district, Cave Creek Unified, where a majority of the Troon and Rio Verde children attend classes.

The outcome essentially prevented a doubling of property taxes (to \$1,190 from \$590 on houses assessed at \$500,000) — at least during the first year — and the secondary taxes assessed to build and maintain schools, since, well, there would not be any in Christopher Verde, as was made clear during the campaign.

Homeowners in the new district will pay about \$1.80 per \$100 of valuation on their homes, compared with the \$1.70 they paid to the county before the vote to create the district. Homeowners in the Cave Creek district pay a little more than \$2.50 per \$100 in base taxes, and just over \$1 more per \$100 in secondary taxes.

Cave Creek schools have more than 250 children from the unincorporated areas of Troon and Rio Verde, a growing percentage of the district’s population of roughly 6,000 children, said Kent Frison, an associate superintendent for the district.

“From that perspective, the taxpayers of the school district, they feel it is inequitable,” Mr. Frison said.

There will be some redress. Because Christopher Verde is now a formal school district, children there will be required to pay tuition when they attend schools in other districts. The Christopher Verde School Board will negotiate the tuition rates and try to have a voice in the administration of the nearby districts.

Mr. Flynn has not applied for a seat on the new board. “I think I can do a better job on the outside just keeping my eyes on them,” he said.

Ms. Perkins is also moving on. “It really ripped our community,” she said of the battle over creating the district.

“We have to deal with the cards we are dealt,” Ms. Perkins said. “We have to make sure our children are taken care of, too.”

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